

Do I need nettles?

What is your image of a wildlife friendly garden? Lots of nettles and brambles? Very little colour from flowers? Or does it look like this?



This garden has won Gold Awards in the Wildlife gardening scheme run by Kent Wildlife Trust but, as you can see, you do not have to sacrifice beauty to get a garden which is a very good habitat for wildlife.

Why do we need our gardens to provide habitats for wildlife? After all we have lots of nature reserves and country parks in Kent so why do we need gardens too. Our gardens can provide very important wildlife corridors between the nature reserves and other green spaces so that wildlife can spread.

If you would like to make your garden more friendly to wildlife there are a few simple, cheap things you can do to get started.

- Use plants which provide nectar for pollinators. Look for the “perfect for pollinators” label. As a general rule, simple, less frilly flowers, are better than some of the more complicated flowers which bees and butterflies cannot get into to get the nectar. Some of them in fact have no nectar. There is a very good guide to plants which are suitable on the Royal Horticultural Society’s web site.
- Provide plenty of cover for wildlife by planting densely, this has the added advantage of reducing the amount of weeding you need to do.
- You can reduce the amount of insecticide and herbicide you use or even avoid them completely. It is possible to have very healthy plants without using insecticides because the balance of the wildlife in the garden changes when the predators arrive to feast on the pests. A good example is the way aphids are eaten by ladybirds. It will not happen immediately but within a year you will start to see a lot more insects in the garden and your plants will survive if they are not stressed by lack of water or nutrients.
- There is always a temptation to tidy up thoroughly in the autumn but try to avoid this as the seed heads provide food for the birds and

wildlife can get shelter from the undergrowth left behind. Hollow stems are used by insects to survive the winter. The dead plants can look very lovely coated with frost.

- Bird feeders and water for birds and insects will encourage even more wildlife.

You will probably find that after your first tentative steps into wildlife gardening you will become fascinated by the wildlife which uses your garden and then you will be hooked.

There is lots of advice on the Kent Wildlife Trust website. Look for wildlife gardening where you will also find information about our new Open Gardens scheme which will start next year.

Helen Knell